

The Unchanging and Flexible God
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Sunday, 3/17/24
St. James

Let us pray....May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen!

My Friends in Christ: Grace and peace to you this morning from God, our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, the great Shepherd of the sheep.

The 19th century English author, Charles Dickens, opens his epoch novel *A Tale of Two Cities* as follows, *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."*

Dickens novel traces the story of one fictitious character whose life transcends events leading up to and including the French Revolution. After 18 years of imprisonment in the Bastille in Paris, the main character is allowed to leave his imprisonment and is exiled into his daughters care in London.

For the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah, they had enjoyed the best of times as a unified kingdom under the reigns of Kings David and Solomon. But as people are so prone to do, they began to bicker amongst themselves and consistently complained to Moses about God and began to follow the religious gods of the Canaanites and others who were their geographical neighbors, to the point that the kingdom divided into two separate kingdoms. Over time, God allowed both kingdoms to be overrun by first the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, consummating with the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. They had had it all, but they chose a path independent of God and intentionally removed themselves from the relationship of love and grace which they had enjoyed previously, to living for themselves and themselves alone. Essentially God allowed them to reap the consequences of their intentions and misplaced loyalty.

But God did not write His people off, even though they continually broke the covenant which He had established with them early in the Exodus, and this covenant had its roots in the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12.. The prophet Jeremiah continued to prophecy to the remnant in Judah and to the exiles in Babylonian that God was up to something new, even though God had continually forgiven the people for their waywardness and would have to continue doing the same. However, God was not going to be rigid and essentially cut off the nations whom He had claimed as His own. He projected and preached a new reality which had a near future and long range future component to it. This is precisely what we find in our OT Lesson for today.

Many, if not most of us, have heard of the phrase, “Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever.”, and this is undoubtedly true. But being the same yesterday, currently and in the future is not the same as inflexibility. In fact, God’s love for you and me drives Him to be flexible. If the 10 commandments weren’t enough to engage Israel in relationship, then there must have been a more effective way in God’s mind for Him to demonstrate His love for us, without negating or nullifying the 10 Commandments.

Over the course of human history, God reworked the Covenant He established with Noah, with Abraham, with Moses and the nation of Israel, finally culminating in this new covenant which God shares with the prophet Jeremiah in our OT Lesson for today.

This new covenant was a promise that God was going to do things differently regarding His relationship with His people culminating with the coming of Jesus, His death and resurrection, and finally the gift of the Holy Spirit. More on that gift in a moment.

Perhaps your perception of God this morning is of a rigid tyrant, who seems to take pleasure in pointing out to you your sin and the punishment to follow. Although, if you read the OT, you find time and time again that God only punished as a last resort, and if you read between the lines of Scripture and the lines themselves, you begin to see the aching heart of God as He viewed the casual way in which Israel and Judah viewed their relationship with Him, and frankly, the casual way at times in which we also treat our relationship with God, individually and as the people of God.

In contrast, there are probably some of you who view God this morning, as a gentle, grandfatherly figure, who when we sin, disapproves of our actions, but never allows us to experience the natural consequences of our actions. The reality is that God falls somewhere in between the two images. God hates sin. But God loves the sinner enough to allow us to experience the natural consequences of our sin as a wake up call, where we experience an Epiphany, knowing that our sin is an obstacle and needs to be dealt with in order for our relationship with God to be healed.

The key element of God’s intentions with this new covenant is forgiveness for past wrongs. You can hear God’s pain in describing Israel’s violation of previous covenants, even though I was a husband to them He says. God’s pain in this relationship with Israel, as it is with us when we perpetuate a life independent of God’s influence, was like the pain of a jilted lover. Only those who have experienced such pain, can begin to understand how God must feel when we go our own way, neglecting an unconditional loving relationship for something we think is going to be better or more advantageous to us.

Yet, in spite of God’s pain at being rejected, He still offers forgiveness, and His ultimate goal is that we return to the relationship we were created to be a part of, even if that means having to allow us to go through suffering in order to wake us up.

There is a song released about 30 years ago by Don Henley of the band Eagles, which he entitled, "The Heart of the Matter" about a romantic relationship which ended abruptly and painfully. As the writer muses about what once was and what reality has become he says this, "I've been trying to get down to the heart of the matter, but my will gets weak and my thoughts seem to scatter, but I think its about forgiveness, even if you don't love me anymore." Note the unconditional undertones in Henley's writing. He is not demanding an apology, or for his ex to begin to feel the pain he has suffered since the relationship ended, but he acknowledges that it is only through forgiveness with no strings attached that he can begin to heal and perhaps establish a more cordial relationship with his ex down the road.

In this promised new covenant which the prophet Jeremiah declared to his audience and to us, we see that God's ultimate goal in His relationship with us is to forgive and to restore the relationship. God demands of us that we acknowledge our failings, and to not seek to blame the messes we make on others, but to own up to our past and present. And in response to the acknowledgment of our sin, we are declared forgiven and an obstacle has been removed in our relationship with God and with each other.

The Divine initiative does not stop with forgiveness and restoration however. God wants to insure that His desire for this relationship will be fulfilled, by promising to write His law, His Gospel on our hearts, so that the motivation to love and serve God is not external, so much as it is internal.

To me, the Law of God written in our hearts is the indwelling Holy Spirit, which you and I receive through faith and the Sacraments, particularly Baptism. This is not to suggest that the people who lived prior to Pentecost are out of luck when it comes to relationship with God. God's Spirit was active in the OT, which we can easily forget. God's redemption and restoration permeate the entire OT. Being saved by grace through faith is not exclusive to the NT. It runs throughout God's dealings with humankind throughout human history. His salvation has always been given to us through faith and not through keeping rules and regulations. The Commandments and the Covenantal relationship was established to instruct Israel and us what it means to be in relationship with God and with each other. Do not, and I repeat, do not assume that the OT has nothing to say to 21st century humanity. The NT continues many of the themes of the OT, and culminates those themes within the person of Jesus Christ.

If there is any thought that I would like to take with me today it would be God's promise to forgive us and to remember our sins no more, particularly the last part, the not remembering. We may find it possible to forgive, but we have a hard time forgetting don't we? It reminds me of an older couple by the names of Saul and Ethel: Once upon a time in their marriage, Saul did something really stupid (Guys: Does this sound familiar?). Ethel chewed him out for his indiscretion. He apologized and they made up. However from time to time, Ethel would bring up what Saul had done way back. Finally Saul, questioned his wife, "Honey, why do you keep bringing that up? I thought your policy was forgive and forget." Ethel replied : "It is, I just don't want you to forget that I've forgiven and forgotten."

Our God takes sin seriously. But He does not allow the seriousness of our sin to prevent Him from forgiving and forgetting. What a liberating thought. God forgives and just as importantly remembers our sin no more. May we rest in that promise today and always. Thanks be to God! Amen.

